DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 271 859 EA 018 648

AUTHOR Boyd, Bob
TITLE Collaborative Decision Making in Local Development of School Policy and Practices.
PUB DATE Apr 86
NOTE 9p.; In: A State in Action: Working with Schools for Program Improvement. Symposium presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (67th, San Francisco, California, April 16-20, 1986). Session 813; see EA 018 844.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Advisory Committees; Citizen Participation; *Decentralization; Educational Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; *Government School Relationship; *Participative Decision Making; *Policy Formation; Power Structure; State Programs
IDENTIFIERS Australia (Victoria)

ABSTRACT

The process of developing the curriculum and determining educational policy in the schools of the state of Victoria, Australia, has shifted in recent years from being a function of the state bureaucracy to being a matter for collaborative decision-making among parents, students, teachers, administrators, and others involved in education. To ensure community power, staff representation on the newly mandated school councils is limited. These councils are authorized to set educational policy as long as state policies are not opposed. Teaching staffs retain the authority to choose the educational means for implementing the council policy. This paper discusses the development and purposes of the government policy on collaborative decision making, lists strategies for encouraging community participation, describes the characteristics of both satisfactory and unsatisfactory collaborative decision making programs, and suggests actions that should be taken to ensure the success of the policy. Attachments provide further information on the organization and scope of school councils. (PGD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED271859

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

R. Boyd

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

COLLABORATIVE DECISION-MAKING IN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOOL POLICY AND PRACTICES

Bob Boyd

Victoria College - Toorak Campus
Victoria, Australia

EA 018 648

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, April, 1986

COLLABORATIVE DECISION-MAKING IN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOOL POLICY AND PRACTICES

DEFINITION OF TERMS:

Collaborative decision-making refers to the process by which parents, teachers, students, principals, administrators and others closely involved in the work of education will reach agreement on educational policy and practice. While participation in decision making in Victoria operates at the school, regional and State level(s) this paper will focus on the way in which local school communities employ collaborative decision-making to determine the general educational policy of the school within the guidelines issued by the Minister of Education.

BACKGROUND:

For the first half of the twentieth century a centralised state bureaucracy controlled the delivery of all facets of education, and teachers, parents and communities were remote from decision making and powerless to bring about change.

Within local schools decisions about educational policy and practice were seen as the preserve of the principal and teachers, parents were involved predominantly in fund raising, minor maintenance and teacher-aide type activities.

In the 1960's there were significant efforts to increase curriculum offerings but this usually took the form of centrally directed, but not mandatory curriculum development initiatives. It became obvious that teachers did not respond well to centrally developed curricula, claiming they were often not relevant to the needs of their school communities; too complex to understand; requiring excessive time and commitment; inadequately resourced; and not understood or accepted by parents who saw little need to alter content and practices that had served them well. Nevertheless the policy of devolution of decision making supported strongly by the teacher unions, hastened the advent of school based curriculum development.

This sometimes resulted in individual teachers, again without any parent or community input, making relatively autonomous curriculum decisions. Some schools experienced difficulty with the time, expertise or resources needed to adequately develop coherent, long term or balanced educational programs.

In the 1970's growing emphasis began to be placed on increased decision making at the school level and while the early years of the decade were characterised by the continued dominance of educational professionals in all decision making, by the late seventies acknowledgement of the role that parents might play was evident. The new "partnership theory" argued that parents, teachers, students - the home and the school - have a common interest in promoting the educational development of students.

Beare (1974) wrote

> "It is not idly, therefore, that I as an educator, reiterate: we want parents to come up to the school; we want parents to discuss education with the teachers; we want to discuss ways in which home and school can keep in step with each other and we want to find ways to involve parents in the government, policy making and educational program of the school."

While for some time, parent involvement was variously ignored, resisted or operated at the level of mere tokenism, it gained momentum as the community began to expect that school processes should reflect the processes of a democratic society and in this the foundations for genuine participation in collaboration between parents, teachers, students and administrators were laid. Alongside this was the growing evidence of the importance of home-school harmony in effecting academic and social development of children.

CURRENT GOVERNMENT POLICY:

There was then a receptive and ready climate for the fundamental changes espoused in the Ministerial Papers, the major principles of which were:

- genuine devolution of authority and responsibility to the school community
- democratic and collaborative decision making
- a responsive bureaucracy.... to service and assist schools and
- action by Government to provide positive discrimination for the disadvantaged.

Collaborative decision making was to be the process by which local schools would examine their own educational policies, develop their own curriculum objectives and organisational policies and decide on the use of resources. The membership of the new School Councils are such as to ensure full and active participation of parents and community. In the case of primary schools (years P - 6) elected staff representatives cannot constitute more that one half of the total membership and on the Councils for post-primary schools (years 7 - 12) elected staff are restricted to no more than one-third of the total membership. (See Attachments A and B)

Reflected in legislation then, was the Governments' firm resolve to have the power for curriculum decision making in the hands of democratically elected School Councils which by their very composition and responsibilities would ensure dialogue between education professionals and the elected parent and community representatives.

It is important to note two restrictions on the decision making of those local school bodies. First a council cannot go against the broad framework of Government education policy. For example, a council could not make decisions which were opposed to multiculturalism, non-sexist education, equality of opportunity and so on. Nor may a council make decisions about the ways in which teaching staff choose the educational means to operationalise council policy. But on the other hand Principals and staff have a clear responsibility to report on, explain and advocate their educational approaches to their communities. In this way professional autonomy and client confidence and support can be reconciled.

COLLABORATIVE DECISION MAKING AT WORK:

One of the major areas where collaborative decision making has been focused, is the development of written school policy documents. Clearly, there will always be considerable debate about the direction in which a school might go, but the task of deciding the goals of a school and the ways they will be realised, is absolutely central at the local school level.

Encouraging parent participation in school life and decision making is, of course, not simple and it is important to accept that, in a community comprising people with differing social, education, cultural and language backgrounds, time and training are important elements. Teacher defensiveness is another potential problem in such decision making. Many teachers view parental involvement with uncertainty and these attitudes will not change quickly.

Several strategies appear to enhance the involvement of parents in collaborative decision making. They include:

(i) working in small groups rather than whole school meetings

(ii) organising meetings at times suitable for parents

(iii) providing resources in the form of child care, language support, information well in advance of decision making

(iv) demystification of educational jargon which precludes lay participation

(v) focusing on parent and community opinions

(vi) providing for social interactions which break down role barriers, and

(vii) having clearly articulated processes by which decisions will be made and conflicts resolved.

In the past two years the new school councils have demonstrated that parents and the community are interested in education, can contribute equally with professionals in policy development and both groups can break down the barriers that stood for so long between the providers of schooling and their clients. Many encouraging articles have been published which outline in an anecdotal way the progress that is being made. Most schools are well on the way to producing policy statements on such aspects as:

specific subject curricula
computer usage
pastoral care
student discipline
equality of opportunity
sexually inclusive curricula
integration of disabled students and
school community usage of resources.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES: When collaborative decision making works well in a school we see the following strengths and characteristics:

- the development of relevent, responsive, local school curriculum
- policies and practices which are the result of dialogue, respect for others' views and finally consensus on an agreed plan
- greater respect between teachers, parents and students
- greater commitment by teachers and parents who enjoy being partners in a cooperative enterprise
- harmony and productiveness in the delivery of the school program
- time having been set aside to establish clear goals and strategies for achieving them
- major educational policy decisions being made by the School Council with the principal and staff being an integral part of the process
- strong channels of communication between all participants.

When it is not working well we usually find one, some or all of the following features present:

- that either the parent or the teacher group, or both, are not yet committed to the idea and retain defensive postures
- that insufficient time has been given to explaining to teachers and parents, what is expected, where responsibilities lie and how collaborative decision making can be made to work
- efforts in collaboration directed into inappropriate areas of decision-making
- training needed for elected staff and parents in collaborative decision making processes is not available

- that there is insufficient interest by staff who are not committed to the community in which they teach
- that parents, because of language, cultural barriers or pressure of home and work, do not feel able to participate
- there is an unnecessary proliferation of committees
- meeting procedures and decision making processes are ineffective
- the flow of information between the various parties is inadequate either in quantity or quality
- there are logistical problems, especially in country areas, which require substantial time commitments by representatives
- language/cultural barriers which may hamper full participation of a significant section of a parent body.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS:

There needs to be substantial and continued support for all participants in refining their skills of collaboration, conflict resolution, consensus seeking and decision making. There must also be support given to both teachers and parents for the additional workload and responsibilities they now have to assume. In the more senior grade levels students, too, need training in methods of communication that facilitate these school-community developments.

The problems of community involvement in school decision making are surmountable and the benefits where it is working well are undeniable.

Attachment A

Extract from Ministerial Paper No. 4
School Councils p.9

MEMBERSHIP

The Government's intention is that the **proportion** of membership of the reconstituted councils will be as follows.

(*a*) Parents (including representatives of parents' clubs) shall constitute **no less than** —
- half of a primary school council; and
- one-third of a postprimary school council.

(*b*) Staff shall constitute **no more than** —
- half of a primary school council; and
- one-third of a postprimary school council. (Members of staff with children at the school at which they teach shall only be eligible for election through this category.)

(*c*) There shall be adequate student representation in postprimary schools in relation to school size and structure.

(*d*) Up to one-fifth of the total membership may be coopted by the elected council, to represent wider community interests.

(*e*) The principal shall be a voting member of the council and, for the purposes of cooption, shall be considered as an elected member.

IMPLEMENTATION

1. Scope for Local Adaptation of Policy

In keeping with its general policy of collaborative development of policy the Government wishes to encourage school councils to propose changes in their own constitutions and to consider local needs in reforming them.

The size of the council and the exact make-up of its membership within the Government's membership requirements is a matter for local decision. Should parent representation be the exact minimum specified or more? What provision will be made for official school parent organisations? Will the arrangements ensure representation of all sectors of the school community and a reasonable balance of the sexes?

What subgroups of teachers and postprimary students will be represented and how will their representatives be chosen?

What steps will be taken to educate students to the representative process?

How will representative elections be arranged to provide for stability and continuity of council direction to school affairs?

Each school's council is invited to consult with all groups involved to redraft its constitution in a way which, while conforming to the Government's education policy and membership requirements, reflects the needs of its local community.

The Government will respond to individual suggestions on these matters.

Attachment B

(i) An Example of the Membership of an Elementary School Council

8 elected parents

2 elected parent association representatives

9 teachers elected by staff

1 principal

1 local municipal council representative

up to 3 co-opted members with particular expertise appointed for 1 year only.

(ii) An Example of the Membership of a Secondary School

8 elected parents

6 teachers elected by staff

1 principal

4 students

up to 3 co-opted members with particular expertise appointed for 1 year only